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Education for Civic Life

Daniel N. Robinson

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Address Delivered at the Conference on Civic Virtue, Civic Life

I.

Education for civic life is, of course, a lifetime education, for at each stage of human development; from early childhood until the final years, we are called upon to live with others in contexts that go beyond the family and reach an ever wider world. Part of the overall education is structured by a curriculum of study under the guidance of teachers.

In recent decades, the widely shared expectation is that the student has become prepared for what is called *higher* education, though there seems to be little agreement on just what makes it “higher.” It surely must be distinguished from other forms of learning or training or it would be an utter waste of time at great cost. Presumably, the distinguishing feature cannot simply be the number of years students have devoted to the cultivation of their abilities, for in that case the longer one works at the grinding wheel or in the paint shop, the “higher” would be the education. Indeed, if no more than time were required, a student’s education would become progressively “higher” if, for example, the third grade were repeated over and over again.

No, what the term refers to is the study of things that are themselves *higher*: higher in the order of abstraction, higher in that plane of thought and of action at which hopeful and worthy lives are lived. The aim is the fuller realization of one’s potential for

critical thought, intellectual integrity, seriousness of purpose. The aim, then, is the shaping of character in ways that render one of value to others.

Understood in these terms, higher education found itself a century and a half ago on a collision course with what the general public has in mind when referring to *reality*. It would be rash to attempt to date the actual collision with any precision. Perhaps a date at least as apt as any other was October 4, 1957 when the Western democracies awakened to the news that the Soviet Union had launched *Sputnik*, all 23 inches of it, with an orbiting lifetime of fifty-seven days. This event, more than any other in recent times, seemed to vindicate criticisms that had been directed at colleges and universities for decades: namely, that the prevailing curriculum of study, except for the parts that were expressly pre-professional, were irrelevant to life, indifferent to the real needs of society, out of step with the modern world, plagued by the perspective of the prep school's headmaster.

The arch adversaries in Russia knew better than to squander the national brainpower on idle chatter about matters that simply do not matter. Within a decade, now stimulated by the civil rights movement and an unpopular war, criticism moved to a decidedly shrill part of the register, dismissing all traditional features of higher education as simply *irrelevant*. Little if any thought was given to the question of unintended consequences. Once the academic world is converted to full-time attempts at *relevance*, there's no telling where the next "cause," the next arousing of public enthusiasm, might take it. Ignoring all this, the academic world jumped feet-first into this new world of lavish federal contracts and grants; now eager students were suddenly finding appeal in

tables of logarithms and spectrometers. Farewell to ancient wisdom and the dust that accumulated over it.

All this, of course, had been said before, often by persons who, as beneficiaries of higher education, should have known better. Consider in this connection from John Locke's influential *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692). After speaking of the value of apples in the diet and the regular washing of feet in cold weather, after offering wise alternatives to corporal punishment, and then finally turning to the formation of character, he scolds those parents who "have a strange value for words, when preferring the languages of the antient Greeks and Romans to that which made 'em such brave men" (Part III, Sec. 71).

He then concludes the section by warning against an education that would trade, "your son's innocence and virtue for a little Greek and Latin."

Later in his essay, Locke returns to this theme:

Latin and learning make all the noise; and the main stress is laid upon his proficiency in things a great part whereof belong not to a gentleman's calling; which is to have the knowledge of a man of business, a carriage suitable to his rank, and to be eminent and useful in his country, according to his station. (Sec. 94)

We see as early as the Age of Newton and in the writing of Newton's most committed disciple an impatience with attention to the remote past at the expense of a future now able to benefit from the achievements of science and the practical arts. The college that teaches best is the college of *experience* where the very facts of life work on the receptive mind to forge a wisdom that can never be acquired from books.

II.

A century later, now in the New World, the classically educated lawyer from Quincy had something different in mind. John Adams's anonymously published "August 1765" was a treatise on the Puritan rejection of Feudal Law. The following lines are featured in that essay:

I always consider the settlement of America with Reverence and Wonder-- as the Opening of a grand scene and Design in Providence, for the Illumination of the Ignorant and the Emancipation of the slavish Part of Mankind all over the Earth...Provision was early made by Law, that every Town should be accommodated with a grammar school-under a severe Penalty-- so that even Negligence of Learning was made a Crime.

The same John Adams, now a dozen years later in the significant year 1776, is consulted by the delegates to the Continental Congress on the task of creating state constitutions. He offered his advice to the delegates from North Carolina, providing them with what became one of the most notable productions of the Revolutionary period, his *Thoughts on Government*. It is significant as a treatise in political theory, but the passage most relevant to my present purpose is this: "Laws for the liberal education of youth, especially of the lower class of people, are so extremely wise and useful, that, to a humane and generous mind, no expense for this purpose would be thought extravagant."

The beneficiaries of the humane and generous mind are the youth of the nation, those on whom its fortunes will soon depend. The liberating education generally available to children of privilege, within the context of a settled and flourishing family life, is likely to be lacking for children of the lower class of people. Adams makes clear in his *Thoughts on Government* that the right form of government and the right foundational principles are but abstractions until embraced by an informed and able citizenry.

If any of the founders was more explicit and persistent in this than Adams, it was Thomas Jefferson. In his *Notes on Virginia* of 1782, Jefferson states that the law covering public education has as its most legitimate objective, “rendering the people the safe as they are the ultimate guardians of their own liberty.” Years later in 1810, the same theme is stressed in his letter to John Tyler, Jefferson then declared,

I have indeed two great measures at heart, without which no republic can maintain itself in strength: 1. That of general education, to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom. 2. To divide every county into hundreds, of such size that all the children of each will be within reach of a central school in it.

In a letter to John Adams in 1813, Jefferson’s concerns are framed in another way, further completing his thoughts on the matter:

This [bill] on education would [raise] the mass of the people to the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety and to orderly government. . . . I have great hope that some patriotic spirit will . . . call it up and make it the keystone of the arch of our government.

Four years later, recognizing that the United States was and would long continue to be a nation of immigrants, Jefferson wrote to Correa de Serra about the aim of his Bill for Universal Education.

To bring into action that mass of talents which lies buried in poverty in every country for want of the means of development, and thus give activity to a mass of mind which in proportion to our population shall be the double or treble of what it is in most countries.

There are good reasons to consider, if only briefly, the intellectual and educational grounding of those who put the American Revolution on a principled foundation and then performed what had never been done before: The creation of a new nation along lines that had never risen higher than the level of theory. One good reason is that the leading members of the group composed treatises and founding documents that are unmatched in the history of constitutional jurisprudence. Still another good reason is that our own contemporary world two centuries later can produce nothing to compare and continues to rely on those same ideals and institutions in seeking peace and justice in a larger and more various world of conflicts and tensions.

III.

If *Sputnik* awakened the complacent West in the middle of the twentieth century, it was Darwin who did the same a century earlier, again sparking debate on the relevance of, shall we say, unscientific modes of inquiry and explanation. By the time his *Origin of Species* appeared, the divorce between science and the humanities was effectively complete; so much so, that when the Birmingham Technical Institute, thanks to a large

gift from Josiah Mason, emerged as the University of Birmingham, the very terms of the gift would include the stipulation that *classics not be taught!*

The Founders Day address was given by Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's "bulldog" and one of the most acute intelligences of the Victorian era. Huxley's address could have been given on October 5, 1957, the day after *Sputnik's* first complete orbit. It might just as well have been given in 1694, to honor Locke's discerning comments on an education worth having.

Huxley discharged his duty with confidence and controlled enthusiasm. He paid a handsome compliment to Josiah Mason for his prescience and then tested his audience with a question: Suppose a youngster hoping to have some good effect on the world had to choose between two curriculums while at university: One, says Huxley, featuring a pair of dead languages, perhaps of use to some future reviewer of books; the other, based on the laws and principles of science by which one can comprehend the operations of the natural world. Huxley took this to be an easy question. Is there any doubt, he asked, in anyone's mind as to which of these should be chosen; anyone, he says, except that "Levite of Culture" Matthew Arnold.

It would not be long before Arnold accepted the challenge and published his instructive essay "Science and Culture." Arnold politely acknowledged Huxley's authority as a man of science, not to mention a "prince of debaters." He then shares with his readers some lines he has read in Darwin's *Descent of Man*, where we learn that "our ancestor was a hairy quadruped, with pointed ears and a tail, probably arboreal in his habits." Arnold is prepared to accept this characterization of human ancestry. But he goes

on to note that, regarding this “poor chap,” this “hairy quadruped with pointed ears and a tail, no doubt arboreal in his habits,” there must have been something in him that *inclined him to Greek!*

The point should be clear enough. In that most insistent of duties —the duty to know oneself, to examine one’s life and one’s world and one’s place within it and duties obligations to it—we are tempted to reduce the burden by finding a shortcut. Thus might we look past human history to something far more remote where the hairy quadruped finds his way by unreflecting instinct and a not yet fully lit deliberating intelligence. Thus thinking of ourselves as “products” of evolution, mere items within a collective gene pool designed without a designer, we are able to suspend the classical impulse to self-perfection, the classical exercise of self-criticism.

But this is but a lazy evasion that soon must confront the *real* reality of the lived life. It is at this point that our focus is nearer to the facts of the matter; nearer to the Athens of Pericles, to the troubling dialogues brilliantly staged by Plato, to Aristotle’s school room, with its incredible panoply of methods and subjects so wondrously integrated. Our focus becomes still sharper, fixing the mind’s eye on the Greek tragedians and the real sense in which one’s character is one’s destiny and, at the same time, is made by us, not for us. We then fall silent so that we might hear them speaking to each other: *Polis andra didaske . . . Polis andra didaske . . . Man is shaped by the polis, taught by the polis, tested by the polis.* We are reminded that it is in the fashioning of our institutions that we knowingly dispose ourselves to one or another form of social life, family life, lives of friendship and bonds of affection. It is in the forming of these

bonds, and the grounds of principle on which they depend, that real meaning and real significance can be wrested from an otherwise indifferent and lifeless cosmos.

In *Odyssey*, Homer sings the lamentations of Odysseus and Penelope, so long separated by war. Undone by his crew, he now fills his days in intimate association with a sea nymph, Calypso. She seeks to enchant him. She reminds him of how many years have been added to Penelope's now troubled life. She then offers him that which no mortal can win for himself: Immortality. If he stays with her, he will never age, he will know neither illness nor decrepitude. But it is a vessel that bargains for choosing his own humanity over divinity: choosing to preserve Odysseus, husband of Penelope—to preserve *himself*.

It is an education that pulls us up out of the flotsam of the moment and allows us to see further, to see more clearly where we've been, what we've done, who we are, who we might become. Education is not professional or pre-professional, except by coincidence. It cannot be reduced to a formula and it cannot be extracted from a reading list or some federally mandated "core" It is hostile to the short answer and regards a true-false question as banal. It exposes to bright light all forms of counterfeit: ingratiating talk as the counterfeit of teaching, rote learning as the counterfeit of thought, mere opinion as the counterfeit of judgment, enthusiasm as the counterfeit of principle.

Perhaps under prevailing conditions such an education is simply beyond the resources—material, personal, even moral resources— of our schools. Perhaps the now unionized and ideologized army of teachers form a faculty so deeply attached to low expectations that there can be no systematic and disciplined examination of the civic

dimension of life. Perhaps the very organization of today's schools and colleges—the clogged bureaucracies spreading the lethal vapors of political correctness, the sheer indifference to vulgarity in all its forms—perhaps all of this has gone too far to be reversed. If so, then today's Odysseus might reconsider his options, choosing happy distraction over a brief, dangerous and painful life whose only claim is that it is his own.

I have no nostrums to offer. I do not have a modern version of that golden string given to brave Theseus by Ariadne, such that he could retrace his steps and free himself from the labyrinth. Retracing the march of modernity away from its moorings in Western civilization, I am inclined to go back no further than John Adams who reasoned that the new government presupposed and was framed by a Christian people. Consider these fragments from his massive body of writing:

The Declaration of Independence laid the cornerstone of human government upon the first precepts of Christianity. . . . The general principles on which the fathers achieved independence were the general principles of Christianity. I will avow that I then believed, and now believe, that those general principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God. . . . The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: it connected, in one indissoluble bond, the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

Is all this just a bit of dated innocence? Consider remarks made a few years ago by Jürgen Habermas—Habermas, the self-proclaimed secular atheist and leading light in

the intellectual world of Europe. In an essay published in 2007 and titled "A Time of Transition," he offers this surprising and arresting judgment:

Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization. To this day, we have no other options. . . . We continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is postmodern chatter.

Earlier, in the Fall of 1930, Evelyn Waugh became the subject of public attention bordering on amazement as a result of conversion to Roman Catholicism. *The Mirror* featured a column in which this most modern of novelists was seen as having been "captivated by the ritual." Why on earth had Waugh, of all people, chosen the path to Rome? And Waugh's reply?

It seems to me that in the present phase of European history the essential issue is no longer between Catholicism, on one side, and Protestantism, on the other, but between Christianity and chaos. Civilization—and by this I do not mean talking cinemas and tinned food, nor even surgery and hygienic houses, but the whole moral and artistic organization of Europe—has not in itself the power of survival. It came into being through Christianity, and without it has no significance or power to command allegiance.

As I conclude my remarks this evening, I repeat that I have no "therapy" in mind, for the symptoms are too general and unstable. Am I alone in detecting something akin to a dissociative form of mental illness in a nation that hosts more than a million abortions each year but expresses as a humanitarian duty the commitment to spare children from

Hondouras the burdens of political unrest? Is there not a species of dyslexia besetting school officials who on grounds of “tolerance and inclusiveness” rule against expressions of religious faith—especially Christian faith?

Teaching, by its very nature, is a calling, even when it also must be a job. It is a wager on the future: a hopeful conviction that, exposed to the best things said and done by our species, youngsters will come to feel wonderfully estranged from all that is prosaic, spiritually empty, indifferent to the noble goal of self-perfection. That calling—the vocation of teacher—presupposes an audience of the eager, the educable, and a setting in which knowledge is protected against frauds and vagrants. My understanding of the atmosphere within our public schools leads me to believe that the protective shield is brittle. Fix that, or don’t bother with the rest. But do recall that remote past when Pilgrim settlers—men and women who made our privileged lives possible—regarded it as criminal that parents would keep their children illiterate, for as illiterates, they could not read their Bibles and thus were isolated from that rich realm of gifts and duties that confer on human life the very terms of its humanity.

Recall this every day. Feature it when parents and school boards muster to set an agenda. Do this much, or just don’t bother with the rest.